

May 7, 2007

Arizona Legislature
1700 W. Washington St.
Phoenix, AZ 85007

Re: Allegations of racial discrimination in discipline.

Dear Colleagues:

This is in response to a letter dated April 12 that I received from 16 concerned legislators reporting allegations of racial discrimination in discipline, and asking us to look into an additional layer of appeals in discipline cases. I am responding to all legislators, since others besides the 16 signatories may be interested in our views on this issue.

If a student received different discipline for the same act because of the student's race, that is terrible, inexcusable, and it is hard to think of anything worse. The force of the law should be brought down on any person who treats students, or anyone else, differently on account of race.

I was a member of a school board for 24 years, and know something about student discipline. Students who are caught in the act will make up any story to get out of the consequences. That is human nature. It is therefore important that government officials have a certain degree of skepticism, and not accept allegations without evidence. I request that you let us know about cases that have been reported to you. We will investigate and let you know whether there really are people in the system so horrible that they would exercise racial discrimination in applying discipline to students.

There is a policy issue to be considered in this context. Our society has experienced a significant reduction in the extent to which parents support schools in the maintenance of classroom discipline. Parents used to support schools in making students understand that actions have consequences. Now, some parents become advocates for their children. Principals report that the students who get into major trouble are the ones whose parents oppose the school in the first instances of discipline. When parents support the school, and help teach the student that actions have consequences, students tend to not get into major trouble in the long term.

School board members, considering themselves advocates for parents, too often overrule teachers in imposing discipline. As a result, some teachers give up, which has led to anarchy in many public schools across the country. Other teachers keep trying, but their constant efforts to try to maintain control in their classrooms results in much time being taken away from instructing the students who are there to learn.

When I served on a school board, I would tell my fellow school board members: "If you want to be a parent advocate that is great. But be an advocate for the 99% of parents who want a disciplined atmosphere in the classroom so that their children can learn. Don't be an advocate for the 1% who think their children never do anything wrong." During my 24 years, we were supportive of teachers imposing discipline, and were known as one of the toughest school districts around. I believe that accounted, in part, for the academic success of the school district. This is a philosophy I am trying to bring to the state level. Enclosed are pamphlets for parents and teachers that we have distributed over the last four years, in furtherance of this initiative.

I believe that we cannot achieve the academic excellence for which we are striving without maintaining strict discipline in the classroom. This requires that school boards do a better job of supporting teachers and administrators in maintaining that discipline.

Adding still another layer of appeal by the student or the student's parents could have a contrary effect to the desired goal: getting school boards to be more supportive of teachers and administrators in imposing the classroom discipline that is necessary for academic success.

Obviously, none of this detracts one iota from the necessity to be sure that the horror of racial discrimination in imposing discipline never appears in any Arizona school. We will be happy to investigate any cases that you refer, and report back to you.

Thank you very much,

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Tom Horne".

Tom Horne

TH:gj
Enclosures (2)